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ABSTRACT

This paper critiques current "school-to-work" practices in rural schools. A look at the rural context reveals that rural workers are more likely to be unemployed and are paid less than workers elsewhere, resulting in high rural poverty. In addition, many kinds of rural decline (in services, transportation, job availability) are tied to larger trends in the increasingly globalized political economy. The trend is for work to leave rural communities, and consequently students taking part in a school-to-work program must leave as well. It is not uncommon for such a program to consist of bus trips to regional centers where rural people commute or migrate to work. What students learn in the process has less to do with job skills than with the larger implicit lesson: if you want work, you must abandon your community. School-to-work in rural locales feeds several dangerous, though widespread, cultural assumptions: first, that children should spend 12 years of formal schooling with their eyes continually focused on the future (although we have no idea what work will look like in the future, nor how much will be available), and second, that youth should consider their own self-interest before their community's welfare. An honest approach to school-to-work would allow students to explore public policy assumptions and results--to see connections between the work available in their communities and policy decisions made elsewhere. This approach would empower students to make decisions that affect the quality of life in their own place. It would be civic education developed through the application of traditional school subjects to the realities at hand. (SV)

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The New Vocationalism in Rural Locales

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It is useful to describe some general, across-the-board, characteristics of rural locales as a precursor to an examination of what goes on in the name of "school-to-work" in rural schools. For instance, unemployment is higher in rural areas than elsewhere, and rural workers tend to be unemployed 50 percent longer than their urban counterparts. When rural workers do go back to work, there is a much greater chance that they will do so only by accepting a pay cut. Moreover, research indicates that rural pay is lower in every field, and that the gap in pay between rural and metro areas is widening. These circumstances have led to unprecedented rates of poverty, rates that are higher than those in America's largest inner city neighborhoods. Even though the lowest teacher salaries in the nation are found in rural locales, rural teachers are often the highest paid employees in their communities.

Service shortages in rural communities have grown worse over the past few decades. Medical care is increasingly scarce as hospitals closed at unprecedented rates during the 1980s. Rail, and especially bus, transportation routes dropped precipitously during the last couple of decades, making long distance travel difficult or impossible for all but the affluent in rural locales. Even the circulation of large daily newspapers dropped significantly during the 1980s. During the 1960s and early 1970s, for example, the Minneapolis Star and Tribune was delivered to almost 25 percent of Minnesota's out-state rural residents. Today the figure is less than five percent.

All kinds of rural decline are tied to large trends in the increasingly globalized political economy. The decline of small-scale fishing, logging, mining, and farming occupations, all of which have been accompanied by the disintegration of rural communities, is connected to the evolution of large American companies into giant multinational corporations with huge property interests around the world. This story is familiar enough.

It is important to recognize, however, that the end result of these developments has been job scarcity in rural locales. At the start of this century, somewhere between a third and half of all Americans farmed for a living. Today, near the century's end, we

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have more prisoners than farmers, if we throw in those currently on probation. That is, barely two percent of Americans are farmers.

This is cause for concern in its own right, but I am interested here in creating a context for understanding what school-to-work must look like in rural locales. The trend is for work to leave rural communities and, consequently, students who would take part in a school to work program must leave as well. This is often the case, as it turns out, although circumstances vary considerably. It is not uncommon, for instance, for a school to work program to consist of bus trips to regional centers where there are manufacturing plants, warehouses, machine shops, and light assembly operations that still employ rural people, especially those who migrate in from small outlying farms and communities.

What students learn in the process has a lot less to do with welding or driving a fork lift than it does with the larger implicit lesson: if you want work, you have to be prepared to abandon your community. Of course, this has been one of the penultimate lessons of the industrial century: one's own self-interest is what is important, the community is secondary. Our Lockean liberal roots have set us on this trajectory, a trajectory that communitarian scholars such as Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer have been trying to derail.

School-to-work programs seem to be heavily dependent on extended field-trips that are often called "job shadowing." If the program is a good one, students will spend some time actually working at the kind of job they are observing. Rural students are condemned to observing only those jobs that exist in their own community, or, very often, those that exist in a community not too far distant. What does this mean for rural students? What kinds of job shadowing do they get to do?

The telecommunications industry has proved, recently, to be a popular employer in rural locales. Reservation centers, customer service lines, telephone sales operations, all manner of telecommunications jobs have sprouted up in some of the most isolated rural communities in the country. There are often unused buildings in such places which, with a little refurbishing, usually provided by the job-hungry community itself, can be made into a serviceable telecommunication factory. Low-wage, low-skill jobs are brought to the community in exchange for a new (or older refurbished) building and the promise of local tax exemptions for a specified period of years. Pay increases often hinge on a kind of newfangled rate system, modified to fit sales made or reservations confirmed. After a period of years, when the community

begins to ask for tax or other community contributions, the corporation decides to unplug its machines and move to another isolated rural community, one all-too-willing to refurbish an old building (or build a new one) and promise municipal tax breaks.

Nursing homes represent another large employer in rural locales, but the number and kind of jobs within them proves to hold little attraction for high school students. Though many schools begin their school-to-work plans with trips to nursing homes, they quickly fall from the agenda. The work is low-paid and the atmosphere is depressing.

It is not as if rural schools are unaware that professional occupations exist. There are local physicians, dentists, and lawyers, for instance, but not many of them, and what frequently becomes a near-constant request to take on young job shadowers can quickly produce a burn-out effect. This circumstance often creates a serious shortage of activities for school-to-work directors in rural schools.

School-to-work in rural locales feeds a couple of dangerous, though widespread, cultural assumptions. The first is that children should spend twelve years of formal schooling with their eyes continually focused on the future. Nothing makes a clearer statement about the relative worth of children and adolescents than formal schooling in this country, a process that says loudly that you have nothing to contribute until you receive a diploma. There should be little wonder why large percentages of school-age youth experiment with sex, alcohol, and drugs. At a time when we have no idea what work will look like in the future, or how much will be available, we nevertheless rail our students to get serious about work in order to facilitate a smooth transition into what we know will be temporary at best.

Besides promulgating a pedagogically unwise (and very likely psychologically unhealthy) preoccupation with the future, school-to-work feeds another dangerous cultural assumption. That is, it encourages youth to consider their own self-interest before the welfare of their community. It supports the near century-long trend of cityward migration on the part of rural youth, not recognizing that this trend has exacted considerable cost. For one, it has enabled large corporate interests to monopolize food production in this country. The meat industry, for example, has shifted from farm-raised beef, pork, and poultry, to large feedlot and confinement operations. These operations put thousands of animals in the most crowded of conditions and then keeps them injected with antibiotics lest an illness spread and wipeout a mutli-million dollar investment. Chemically-laden meats are just one price

we pay for cityward migration of the sort encouraged by programs like school-to-work.

In fact, given the uncertain nature of work at this point in time, and, given the popular predictions about what has come to be called "the end of work," school-to-work seems like a cruel hoax. There are places, however, where the concept has been turned on its head, so to speak. That is, instead of encouraging youth to consider jobs outside of the local community, some schools have asked youth to critically examine local circumstances. The following is a list of questions given to Senator Tom Daschle of South Dakota by a high school senior at Howard High School, Howard, South Dakota. Howard has a population of 900 people. The K-12 district serves 550 students.

The students at Howard recently read Osha Gray Davidson's account of the 1980s farm depression called *Broken Heartland: The Rise of America's Rural Ghetto*. When Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle passed through town and spoke at the local school, he was handed a copy of Davidson's book and a list of questions with the request that he answer the questions after reading the book. The Senator agreed to do this. The questions that follow made up the Mr. Daschle's homework.

1) In the endnotes on pages 198 and 199 of broken Heartland, there is a partial list of Cargill products. The partial list includes aluminum, iron, rubber, and electronic parts; all used to build tractors. It also includes gasoline, hybrid seeds, and fertilizers. Knowing that farmers pay retail for all of the above mentioned items to put in their crops, then sell their crops on a market dominated by only three or four corporations (one of which is Cargill), for wholesale prices, please consider the following questions:

- A. Can you suggest a monopoly does not exist after reading the piece from the Antitrust Law and the Economics Review?
- B. If a monopoly does exist, why isn't something being done?
- C. If a monopoly does not exist horizontally, does it exist vertically?
- D. How can Anne Bingaman possibly head up the Antitrust Division of the Department of Justice given her ties to Fortune 50 and 500 companies?
- E. Ethically and legally, how can federal court justices take all expense paid Florida vacations to learn about antitrust law at the

expense of major corporations?

G. Knowing that only seven federal court judges have been removed in the history of the United States for violating ethics, how can this removal process be changed so unbiased judges can hear antitrust lawsuits?

2) One of the great forefathers of our country, Thomas Jefferson, believed that the yeoman family farmer would form the cornerstone of American democracy. Since 1940, the number of farmers has decreased by two-thirds. In the Coda to *Broken Heartland*, Osha Davidson writes: "Small towns and the family farms surrounding them formed the cradle of American democracy. When these institutions are gone, where will democracy flourish? A lesson in field ecology has the last word here, for democracy is a living thing--destroy its habitat and it too will perish." Under the current conditions, can we expect democracy to be alive and well in America?

A genuinely honest approach to school-to-work would allow students to explore the cultural assumptions that lead to public policy, assumptions like "bigger is better." It would enable students to see the connection between the quality and kind of work available in their communities as a direct result of policy decisions made somewhere, most often somewhere quite distant from the immediate community. This approach to school-to-work equips students with a sense of political efficacy by creating the opportunity for students to make decisions that can have a substantive affect on the quality of life in their own place. It is civic education developed through through the application of traditional school subjects to the realities at hand. It is much more honest, much less deceptive, approach to preparing students for the "world of work."